

INTERNATIONAL CITY MANAGERS' ASSOCIATION  
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## THE MAKING OF ADMINISTRATIVE DECISIONS

What decisions should be made by the chief administrator and/or the city council, and what decisions should be made by subordinate administrative officers?

The heart of the chief administrator's job lies in making certain fundamental decisions for the city government -- and perhaps also in refusing to make other decisions which should properly be made by his subordinates. What decisions should the administrator make and which should he delegate? Are there any criteria or standards, applicable to the small city and the large city alike, which will guide the administrator dividing the decision-making job between himself and the city council on the one hand and the department heads on the other? Standards to guide the administrator by and large do not depend on the size or other local peculiarities of the city for their application. To keep the discussion within bounds it will be confined to the division of work between a city manager and his administrative staff -- the problem of council-manager relations and the proper line of demarcation between the legislative body and the chief administrative officer will not be taken up. The same principles or standards generally can be applied also in strong mayor-council cities.

1. Any decision to increase or decrease appreciably a service which the city provides its citizens should come to the manager for approval, either for his decision or so that he may present the matter to the city council for determination. If, for example, a group of citizens makes it known that they would like a more complete program of snow removal than has been carried on in the past, their request should be neither approved nor denied by the public works director without clearance with the city manager. Of course if the question has been decided and a new request comes from another source within a short time a new clearance would not be necessary. Illustrations of decisions of this kind could be multiplied -- change from curb to house collection of garbage, substantial change in playground hours, and so forth.

2. Any change in policy with respect to the enforcement of municipal ordinances or regulations affecting citizens should clear over the manager's desk. Although the enforcement of regulatory ordinances is usually entrusted to individual departments, the manager has an over-all responsibility for all such regulations. Although good administrative practice requires a periodic weeding out and codification of ordinances, it is unfortunately true that in most cities there are regulations which for one reason or another have fallen into disuse and are not enforced. Wherever such a circumstance exists, the department concerned should not be permitted to alter its enforcement policy without the approval of the city manager.

Suppose, for example, that an ordinance requiring dated labels on milk bottle has been dormant for ten years. A housewife finding a dead cricket in a milk bottle writes a letter to the newspaper and a teapot-tempest results. It is not at all unlikely that the health officer will be tempted to initiate a program of "strict enforcement" -- including enforcement of the date-label requirement. The result will be a milkless morning for the city's households and a storm of criticism for the city manager. No decisions have more serious consequences for the

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public relations of the city government than those involving law-enforcement policy.

3. Any essential variation in the budget should receive the city manager's approval. This is very closely related to the first topic discussed -- changes in public services -- but is important enough to deserve separate treatment. The budget sets up a program of work for the year either in terms of work units or at least in terms of dollars-and-cents of expenditures. The city manager spends a good many weeks of discussion and thought each year on his budget, and after the program has once been formulated by the manager and his staff and adopted by the council any variation from that program should be cleared with the manager.

For instance, if a large amount of money is allotted for street repairs, and because of a mild winter the repair program is not as extensive as anticipated, even though there has been no lowering of standards, a transfer of funds from this program to some other service where requirements have increased, say street cleaning, should not be permitted without the manager's approval. Similarly, if the accounting department has been allotted funds for new adding machines, and later decides it would like accounting machines instead, that change should be discussed and cleared with the manager.

4. Any matter which is to be presented to the city council should first be brought to the attention of the city manager. A troublesome problem for any manager is that of knowing in advance what is going to be presented to the council. Matters for council consideration originate chiefly in four different sources: (1) the manager himself, (2) department heads, (3) citizens who present their suggestions to the manager or in person to council members or before the council, and (4) councilmen.

It is desirable that the manager know all these matters in advance, though it is probably impossible completely to eliminate by-passing except in the case of department heads. Assume, for example, that a department head who has a grievance or problem which he has not cleared with the manager presents it in person or in writing to the council. This may cause serious embarrassment not only to the manager but to the council as well. If the manager permits repeated insubordination of this kind, his administrative authority and his influence will be undermined and his usefulness to the city gravely impaired.

How can the manager deal with this problem? It is obviously neither possible nor desirable that he stand as a censor between the council and the public and administrative departments. He must have information on these matters, not to keep them from the council but so that when they are presented he will have the information necessary to assist the council in reaching an intelligent and well-considered decision. If the manager has an "open door" policy, making it easy for his employees, the public, and councilmen to discuss matters with him, it will usually seem to them the most natural and simplest procedure to come to him first, before raising matters for council consideration.

5. Whenever a citizen or councilman is dissatisfied with some aspect of city operations and is unable to receive satisfaction from the department head concerned, the manager must evidence his willingness to review the decision of his subordinate. Appeals of this kind take as much of the manager's time as any other single item, but if he is to stay on top he must be able and ready to deal with them. He must deal with complaints that come from citizens; he must deal with complaints from councilmen themselves; he must deal with employee complaints. If



the manager doesn't handle these complaints they will be handled by the council, right over his head.

6. The manager must resolve all conflicts which arise out of inter-departmental relations. Frequent inter-departmental feuds may be a symptom of faulty organization or of the incompetence of one of the administrators involved. But in the best of organizations the exact division of work between two departments will sometimes be in doubt and a disagreement will result. It is a primary function of the manager to step in and straighten out such disagreements before they reach the "feudin'" stage. A public works department and a park department, for example, may each think that the other should maintain a storm drain running through the park system. The public wants service -- it does not care what department provides the service -- and to prevent aggravating delays due to buck-passing the manager must step in promptly to assign responsibility in such cases. The corollary to this principle is that department heads must be trained to bring their differences to the manager, without rancor and without delay, whenever (and this should not be too frequently) they cannot settle them in a spirit of mutual accomodation.

7. Decisions involving relationships with other governmental units are a direct responsibility of the manager. These outside units may be divided into two classes: those at the local government level, and those above the local government level.

Citizens come to the manager's office with complaints and grievances about agencies over which the manager has no control. State or county officials having some local problem take it up with the city manager because he is the man closest to the problem. The manager can, of course, refuse to deal with questions outside the scope of his formal authority, but in doing so he will not improve the attitude of citizens toward their city government, and he will unwittingly teach them to by-pass him in their dealings with the city.

Similarly when the city is requesting funds, or legal authority, or some service from a state or federal agency, the city's request will carry more weight if it is presented by the manager, than if some subordinate makes the contact. Furthermore, in these situations the subordinate seldom has sufficient over-all knowledge of the city's administration or authority to conclude an agreement.

8. When an emergency arises in the city, for which no procedure has been worked out, the handling of the emergency should be under the manager's direction -- or he should designate the official who is to be responsible for handling it. Of course there are all kinds of "emergencies". If the street superintendent is ill and cannot go to work there should obviously be another man who can take over, without the intervention of the manager. The real emergencies are serious floods, strikes, conflagrations, and the like, where the manager should be on the job to make decisions.

The reasons why the manager is concerned in such cases are clear. First, even if his subordinates are fully capable of coping with the problem and have adequate authority, citizens will come to the manager with their problems and will expect him to be informed and on the job. Second, although the fire chief has sufficient authority to deal with an ordinary fire, the control of a conflagration requires close cooperation with the police department, the water department, and other agencies of city government. The manager must be on the job if for no other reason than to make certain that this cooperation is instantaneous and complete. The manager's administrative skill will be exhibited in serious emergencies by his

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ability to intervene just far enough and no farther than is necessary to make certain that his subordinates have sufficient authority to cope with the situation. If he refuses to go this far he will be tempting chaos and disaster. If he goes farther he will undermine the self-confidence and self-reliance of his subordinates.

After the first time it occurs an emergency is no longer an emergency. A city government which has worked out a careful disaster preparedness plan adaptable to a wide variety of circumstances, and which has kept its staff trained in the carrying out of the plan, will require only a minimum on-the-spot direction from the manager. Perhaps this will deprive the city manager's existence of the little drama that it previously possessed, but it will make for the more effective handling of emergencies.

#### Comments on the Eight Principles

These eight points cover the principal classes of decisions which should be cleared by the city manager. To say that a manager should approve a particular decision does not mean that he must personally perform all of the footwork leading up to the decision. In many cases the manager should not act at all until he has received the findings and recommendations of his subordinates, and then his action should be confined to a mere approval or disapproval of the plan suggested.

By and large the average manager's time is taken up with matters that are brought to his attention by others. He has very little opportunity to get either a detached over-all view of his city's problems or to act as a spark-plug initiating improvements in the city government. Some device or procedure is therefore needed that will periodically call up for re-examination the basic decisions which guide city activities. It should not require citizen's complaints, for example, to bring about an examination of garbage collection procedures. The best way is for the manager to carry on a continuous administrative audit of activities and procedures.

A manager must actively seek suggestions from the council and citizens and correlate and analyze them. The manager is the paid representative of the citizens and it is his duty to bring their ideas and suggestions together and formulate them into a program, and to suggest the ways and means for carrying out that program within the limits of the city's finances. On the administrative side it is a professional responsibility of the manager to seek information as to how he can improve organization and administrative methods. His professional association should be an important source of ideas for his administrative audit; he will keep abreast of the literature in his field; and he will seek contacts with other city administrators who have problems in common with his own.

In conclusion, the concern here has been with the decisions which should at least reach the city manager's desk. It is not to be implied that these decisions should not go any farther than his desk, that the council should have no part in making them. On the contrary, almost all the matters listed above should be brought to the attention of the council for their information, and in many instances the manager should refuse to make the decision himself, simply referring it, with or without recommendations, to the council. The eight principles listed above are intended as a guidepost for the manager in his relations with his department heads and in marking out the boundaries of his own job.